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ABSTRACT

A study investigated Japanese college students' perceptions and assessments of their college English classes, and to what factors they attribute difficulty in acquiring oral English. Subjects were 189 students from a junior college and a university, in first- through third-year English conversation classes. Most were English majors required to take the courses. Data were drawn from a questionnaire, class evaluations, informal interviews, and class observation. Students were asked to evaluate their classroom atmosphere, textbook, handouts, instructor, and themselves. Results indicate the students lacked the vocabulary necessary to engage in meaningful dialogue because they did not review classroom learning. Most felt once-a-week conversation was adequate, but also complained of lack of opportunity to use their English. Respondents rated the instructor and self-motivation as the most important factors in acquiring English, and rated their peers, text, and curriculum as having little importance. Responses to open-ended questions suggest self-consciousness, perceived attitudes of other students, and limited relationship with classmates were also factors. Most held favorable opinions of the teacher. Implications of the findings for understanding student expectations and developing instruction are discussed briefly. (MSE)

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HOW STUDENTS ACCOUNT FOR THEIR POOR ENGLISH SKILLS

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Among my colleagues and friends who teach English conversation classes at the college level, a commonly heard complaint from their students is "This is supposed to be a conversation class, but there isn't any conversation in this class." Upon hearing this, you scratch your head and think to yourself, "That's funny. My job title clearly states Instructor of English Conversation, and that's what I've been teaching every week for the past year. I am schooled in ESL theory and I believe and practice the communicative approach. I do pair-work and group-work activities and have stocked up on the general tools of the trade. So, how can the students say I haven't been teaching them conversation? What do they really mean when they say this? After getting over the initial feelings of bafflement (and, yes, some annoyance), I began to ask myself, "What do students mean by lack of conversation? Are they unhappy about their own lack of oral production or that of their classmates? Were they really dissatisfied because their perceptions of a conversation class were not met or was this simply a blanket excuse to complain about other underlying problems they experienced in the class?"

The objective of the study is to investigate the basis of the abovementioned complaint by examining how college students perceive and assess their English conversation classes. To what or to whom do the students attribute their difficulties in acquiring oral English? It is a cliche to say that, in general, Japanese students are passive in the classroom. The other commonly heard statement is that Japanese are shy. Too often

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these cultural traits are used as excuses for students' failure to learn and speak English. What exactly do they mean when they say they are shy? They certainly do not act that way outside of the classroom. Why are they so passive? Are they really bored and disinterested? Is it too difficult for them? Or are there other factors involved in making them passive in the classroom? In my research I attempt to answer some of these questions by eliciting specific reasons why some students seem to have such a difficult time in English conversation classes.

The Students

A total of 189 junior college and university students were represented in the study. At the junior college the students were first and second year English conversation class female students. At the university the students were first, second, and third year English conversation class male and female students. A majority were English majors who were required to enroll in English conversation courses. The students at the junior college were leveled according to their abilities based on an oral exam administered at the beginning of the academic year. At the university the students were grouped according to their homeroom. Analysis of the data did not reveal any significant differences in student attitudes. The fact that the junior college was single sex and the university coed did result in some differences in relation to classroom dynamics, which I interpreted as basically positive. Male and female students often engage in self-segregation in the classroom, with male students sitting on one side of the room and female students sitting on the opposite side. But when randomly paired together to complete tasks, they were actually quite active and productive. There were also some differences in opinions between students in first, second, and third year conversation classes, but in most cases I attribute these differences more to personality within each class rather than year of students.

Method

The scope of my research was accomplished through the collection of data utilizing class evaluations, information culled from informal interviews with students, and observation of the classes in the course of the semester. The main part of the evaluation consisted of a questionnaire. Five areas in which students were to evaluate their experiences and level of satisfaction with their English conversation classes were included: (1) classroom atmosphere; (2) the textbook; (3) the handouts; (4) the instructor; and (5) the students themselves. Within each area were specific questions. In the area of classroom atmosphere, students were asked to state their opinions about the size of the class, pace of the lessons, attitude of classmates, etc. Regarding the textbook and handouts, students were asked to assess the interest, content, and difficulty levels of the materials. The instructor was evaluated based on the speed, volume, clarity, and level of her speech and explanations. The demeanor and attitude of the instructor towards her students and teaching were also evaluated. In the category of students they were instructed to answer questions concerning their study habits and efforts inside and outside of the classroom. The second part of the evaluation consisted of the ranking of five items related to learning English: (1) the school curriculum; (2) the text; (3) the teacher; (4) classmates; and (5) student motivation. Students were instructed to rank the five items from one to five, one being the most important factor in learning English and five being the least important factor in learning English based on their own opinions and experiences. The third part of the evaluation was self-explanatory and consisted of four open-ended questions: "I like English because ... "; "I don't like English because ..."; "English is difficult because ..."; and "The best way to learn English is ..." The fourth part of the evaluation was optional. Students were given the opportunity to express additional comments and opinions if they wished in English or Japanese.

Analysis

The results of the questionnaire produced some obvious answers to why students have difficulty in an English conversation class and why they complain that there is no conversation (see Appendix). The majority of the students lack the necessary vocabulary in order to engage in meaningful dialogue because they seldom review what they learned in class. Rather than building a repertoire of new vocabulary words and useful phrases every week in order to help them improve, the students are basically at the same starting point every week. An analogy would be running in place - you expend the energy but you don't go anywhere. The students come to class and bring their textbooks. But their failure to review and utilize what they learn from week to week holds them back and keeps them at the same spot. The fact that most students felt it was adequate having English conversation only once a week also indicate that they do not understand what it takes to acquire a foreign language. They complain that they do not have the opportunity to utilize English and, therefore, cannot improve their skills, yet do not see the irony in not wanting to have more classes per week. Their expectations are unrealistic considering their lack of effort and initiative. Although they realize that the key to success in learning English involves practice and self-motivation, the results of the questionnaire suggest that many do not apply them in their English conversation classes (see Appendix).

In the ranking section of the evaluation, students overwhelmingly indicated that the instructor and self-motivation were the most important factors in acquiring English Surprisingly, the importance assigned to their own classmates ranked consistently last in their assessment suggesting the importance students place on the vertical relationship between instructor and student in contrast to the horizontal relationship between student and student. Text and curriculum ranked equally low.

However, when asked to complete open-ended questions, the answers revealed that for many students the classroom atmosphere and the role of other students did have a

significant bearing on whether they performed well in class. Some of the students' fears in speaking up were directly linked to their self-consciousness regarding other students in the class. This included the perceived attitudes of other students in the class, lack of close friends, lack of teamwork, and the passivity of other students. The students themselves may not view and realize how important other students are in their language learning process, but as their answers reveal, other students were indeed directly related to whether they performed and utilized language in class and thus in learning English (see Appendix).

Most students reported that they held favorable opinions toward the instructor. Yet despite their positive perceptions of the instructor and overall positive attitudes about the class, these did not automatically promote active language acquisition.

Educational Implications

Clearly the classroom environment, specifically student dynamics, plays a very important role in English language learning in Japan. As evidenced in this study, students explicitly blamed themselves for lack of effort and motivation in studying and learning English. Equally blamed, though implicitly, are other students in the class who detract from the learning environment by not being active, being too quiet, and failing to foster a friendly atmosphere conducive to learning. The words nervous and shy appear frequently when students try to explain why they cannot learn English. A better word to describe their feelings is fear, -- fear of making mistakes in front of others, fear of outdoing others, basically a fear of standing out especially if they do not know the other people very well. Classes where students get along with each other naturally show a higher participation rate. I have observed that second year students are sometimes more relaxed with each other and show more willingness to engage in conversation. Some students also seem to show an improvement in their attitude and performance during the second semester.

Other students set the tone and determine the atmosphere of the class, more so than the teacher. The students' passivity is influenced and governed by their classmates. The students may follow instructions given by the instructor, but it is the subtle cues from their classmates that play a stronger role in regulating their classroom behavior. It is our responsibility as instructors to recognize this situation. Instructors should be aware of the implicit as well as the explicit messages in the classroom. In order to produce a truly effective environment for language learning, students should be made aware that interactions between students are equally, if not more important, than interactions between teacher and students. This is not always an easy task but an understanding and awareness of these implicit messages will serve to guide the instructor when trying to create a classroom conducive to learning and fostering and nurturing positive attitudes in the classroom.

To respond to the students' claim that there is no English conversation in an English conversation class, -- it's not that there is no talking in class. Rather, the students' expectations about what constitutes conversation are different from what they actually experience in class. Students are traumatized by exam English and so regard any formalized fashion of studying English with suspicion. This would explain their desire for conversation, specifically free talk. I would interpret this as reactionary emotional resistance - choosing a learning style completely different from what they had known, dreaded, and hated. Free talk ideally has no rules or parameters. It is spontaneous, and most important of all, natural. When students say they want English conversation, it is this natural and spontaneous free flow of ideas and information for which they are hoping. However, in order to engage in a conversation, even a basic one, students must acquire the necessary grammar and vocabulary. This can only be achieved through practice and effort. In a typical conversation class there is controlled practice leading to free practice. Students do not seem to appreciate the necessity of the controlled practice and reject it as boring and not "real" English. Students have to realize that learning English is not always fun and

games. It requires work. Students should also realize the importance of student-student interactions because learning a language is a social, interactive process. Teachers are facilitators. As facilitators we can help students learn by giving them support and guidance. We are not there to learn for them.

Appendix

(1) Some Responses to Open-Ended Questions

I like this class because ...	It's a friendly class.
	I have friends in the class.
	I can learn with friends.
	It is a pleasant class.
	The students are positive.
	I have many friends.
	I like to speak with other students.
I don't like this class because ...	It's not active.
	It is a quiet class.
	Some students not positive and active.
	Strangers are in the class.
	Other students are not positive.
	No friends in the class.
	Not a friendly class.
	Classmates are not friends.
	Not everyone tries to use English often.
	No teamwork.
	Group work.
	No discussion.

(2) Some Highlights of the Questionnaire

- 61% reported that they would like to have class only once a week.
- 49% reported that 90 minute classes are too long.
- Although a majority reported coming to class every week, bringing their textbooks and being punctual, 59% never prepared before class and an overwhelming 73% never reviewed the lesson after class.
- 28% reported that they do not even try to use English during class.
- 48% reported being active in class sometimes, rarely, or never.
- 46% reported that they sometimes, rarely, or never worked hard in class.

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